

Marketing Specialty Cut Flowers

Agriculture and Natural Resources Fact Sheet #520

Growing specialty cut flowers for market can be a challenging but rewarding experience. Though the floral marketplace is competitive (flowers are a multibillion dollar industry in the US), small-scale specialty growers can flourish by finding unique marketing opportunities. Such marketing possibilities include local cut flowers, edible flowers, potpourri mixes, and medicinals. Locally grown flowers offer uniqueness in a market that is often flooded with limited choices of imported or mass-produced flowers.

Getting Started

Before you get started, decide if you want to farm for a living or as a lifestyle. Do you want to break even or make a profit? How much of a profit do you want to make? Decide how much money you will make each year, but be realistic about your goals. Develop a well thought out business and marketing plan. A business plan provides you with a road map to get you where you want to go.

Elements of Marketing

Market research is key. Before you plant anything, do some research about potential markets so you will have a better idea of what to grow and where to sell. Look for trends, talk to other growers, visit farmers' markets and florists to get an idea of what's available and what is not, what sells and what gets tossed. Some things to consider that can make selling flowers easier are product quality, customer service, pricing, and record keeping.

Timing is also critical. The best time to find buyers for your product is not during the busiest part of the season (July-August) when you are harvesting. Consider gathering customers in May, June, and even September when you have time to do the job right. If you are harried, potential customers may think you are not organized or in control of your operation. Keep everything in perspective and above all, have fun. Customers will appreciate your relaxed yet energetic attitude.

Product Quality and Presentation

Harvest quality products and be sure to put your best foot forward when you present them to customers. Make sure everything you are selling is fresh and of high quality. First impressions are crucial. Whether at a flower stand, in the back of your truck/van, in a bucket, or on the farm your operation should look good. Keep your products and even

your tools and equipment organized and clean.

Be aware that you may need to develop harvest standards (e.g., the number of stems per bunch, or the number of florets per stem, etc.) for you and your buyers because standards for most locally grown flowers may be lacking.



Customer Service

Be friendly and get to know your customers. Ask them questions that show you care about their needs. Gestures such as sending a personal card or note to your larger accounts can go a long way to keep your customers coming back. Of course, you must decide how much you will do for your customers. Are you willing to deliver? Do you want your farm to be open for visits by them? Decide what you are comfortable with and stick with it.

Consistency is a key component of good customer service. Be on time for appointments and deliveries. It is often a good idea to have regular days that you deliver or are available for your customers. Consistency is also important for pricing and bunches. Keep your prices more or less the same and make sure bunches are always the same size. If you decide to change prices or bunch sizes, be sure to alert your customers ahead of time. Your customers will appreciate being informed. Let them know what is going on at the farm, what is available when, and how to keep the products you sell them at their best. Mailing lists, newsletters, word of mouth, internet, and the phone are great ways to keep customers abreast of the latest news about your operation.

Pricing and Record Keeping

When setting prices be sure not to undersell yourself. According to Pamela and Frank Arnosky, authors of the monthly column "Specialty Cut Flowers" in *Growing for Market*, "...a lot of growers, especially new ones, chronically underprice their flowers." If your prices are too low, you won't recover your costs and fellow flower growers will also lose.

To set prices you will need to know your production costs and the profit margin you will need over that amount. Knowing your production costs will help prevent you from underselling yourself. You will also need to know established market prices. Although cost accounting may not be your favorite farming activity, without it you won't know where you stand financially.

It is a good idea to know how much your flowers are worth ahead of time. This way you will be prepared to sell products even if you had not anticipated a demand for them. Talk with other growers and look at auction prices for pricing information. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service lists wholesale prices for cut flowers, produce, and herbs (see Resources section).

Finally, successful marketing means keeping good records. Records provide a yardstick for measuring your success. They help you monitor your costs, track your tasks and time, and reach your goals. Records can also help you decide what to grow or not to grow. Keep records of planting, harvesting, and weed control efforts. Note which seed companies produce the best results so you will know which ones to use again. Of course, in addition to costs, you will also want to record the amount of money made for different types of flowers.

Deciding Where to Sell

To decide where to sell your flowers you need to consider such factors as the amount of experience you have, your level of comfort in dealing with the public, the amount of time you have for deliveries, the volume you plan to sell, and the amount of time you can devote to selling. Different selling venues offer various benefits and require different levels of effort. Consider them all and then choose the one or ones that are best suited to your needs. Some considerations for different selling venues are listed in Table 1, but don't be limited by this list. You may find other opportunities or constraints that are particular to your situation.

Ten Most Profitable Flowers

Zinnia 'Giant Dahlia BluePoint' or 'State Fair'
 Achillea millefolium and A. 'Coronation Gold'
 Scabiosa
 Larkspur 'Giant Imperial'
 Ageratum 'Blue Horizon'
 Veronica 'Sightseeing'
 Malva zebrina
 Salvia horminum
 Snapdragon 'Rocket' mix
 Verbena bonariensis

—from The Half Acre Flower Plan published by Growing for Market in 1995.



Table 1. Attributes of various selling venues.

Brokers	Brokers sell your product for you, so you must be confident they have standards and know how to sell and ship product well. Communication is key. Ask for a list of the broker's growers and customers and interview them. Brokers often want a percentage of your yearly gross or a commission. Be sure you know what services you are getting and for what fees.
Chefs/Restaurants	Requires flexibility and high quality products. Time needed to make deliveries may be considerable.
Farmers markets	A good place to get started. Can be time consuming but also offers a chance to learn from other growers.
Florists	Most know exactly what they want and require very high quality. Considerable time may be required for deliveries.
Grocery Stores	Can handle large volumes but can be difficult to establish accounts.
Mail order/Shipping	Requires finding customers through some type of advertising so can be time consuming. Must create some form of catalog. Shipping out of area requires packaging, coolers, and often trips to the airport.
On-farm	Does not require deliveries but your farm becomes public. Options include u-pick flowers, roadside stands, custom cutting.
Other growers	Can find a niche selling to growers who do not have items you grow.
Subscriptions	Offers upfront payment for scheduled delivery of flowers. Most opportunities are subscriptions to those who work in offices.
Weddings/Events	Can be time consuming so be sure to account for and charge for your time.
Wholesalers	Can handle large volumes and variety. Can be hard to get them interested in your products. May want exclusives to a product but this usually means they will buy a larger quantity. If you sell to a wholesaler, you cannot also sell to their customers.

Resources

Becoming and staying informed is critical to any marketing program. Keep yourself abreast of trends, prices, and production methods by attending conferences, talking to other growers, and reading. Here are a few places you can go to find more information.

Associations

Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG) 440-774-2887; email: judy@ascfg.org; web:

<www.ascfg.org>. Distributes newsletter, *Gatherings-the Cut Flower Quarterly*.

California Cut Flower Commission, 73 Hangar Way, Watsonville, CA 95076; 831-728-7333; email: ccfc@ccfc.org; web: <www.ccr.org>.

The Society of American Florists, 1601 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314; 800-336-4743; web: <www.safnow.org>.

Internet

FloraSource <www.flora-source.com> Floriculture and horticulture information exchange web site.

Marketing Resources

The Floral Marketing Association (FMA), 1500 Casho Mill Road, P.O. Box 6036, Newark, DE 19714-6036; 302-738-7100; web: <www.pma.com/fma/fma.htm>.

USDA, AMS, F&V Division, Market News Branch, Room 2503, South Building, PO Box 96456, Washington, DC 20090-6456; web: <www.ams.usda.gov/marketnews.htm>. Gives daily or weekly updates on wholesale produce/herb/cut flower prices.

USDA Farmer Direct Marketing, P.O. Box 96456 Room 2644 - S, 1400 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, DC 20090-6456; 202-690-407; web: <www.ams.usda.gov/directmarketing>.

Publications

The Furrow, Deere & Company, One John Deere Place, Moline, Illinois 61265-8098; 309-765-8000.

Field Grown Cut Flowers: A Practical Guide and Sourcebook: Commercial Field Grown Fresh and Dried Cut Flower Production by Alan B. Stevens. Avatar's World. 1997.

The Flower Farmer: An Organic Grower's Guide to Raising and Selling Cut Flowers by Lynn Buczynski. Chelsea Green Publications. 1997.

Flowers for Sale: Growing and Marketing Cut Flowers: Backyard to Small Acreage (A Bootstrap Guide) by Lee Sturdivant. San Juan Naturals 1994.

Growing for Market: a journal of news and ideas for market gardeners. PO Box 3747, Lawrence, KS 66046; 785-748-0605; Includes monthly column "Specialty Cut Flowers."

Pricing Specialty Cuts, ASCFG Bulletin No. 2, Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG). See contact information above.

Sources

Arnosky, Pamela and Frank. 1999. "Know Your Costs Before You Set Your Prices." *Growing for Market*. Vol. 8, No. 1. Fairplain Publications, Lawrence, KS.

Buczynski, Lynn. 1995. *The Half Acre Flower Plan*. Growing for Market, Lawrence, KS.

Foss, Janet. 1999. *Marketing Cut Flowers*. Workshop at the Pike Place Market Farmers' Market Conference, March 1-2, 1999, Seattle, WA.

Handwerker, T. 1990. *Specialty Flowers: A Small-Scale Agriculture Alternative*. USDA, Cooperative State Research Service, Office of Small-Scale Agriculture. Washington, DC.

Popular flowers to start with...

Achillea	Iceland Poppies	Spirea
Ageratum	Iris	Sunflower
Agrostemma	Larkspur	Statice
Alchemilla	Lavendar	Stock
Amaranthus	Liatris	Strawflower
Ammi Majus	Lilac	Sweet William
Aquilegia	Lupine	Tansy
Asclepias	Lysimachia	Trachelium
Aster	Nigella	Tuberose
Astilbe	Peppergrass	Veronica
Astrantia	Phlox	Viburnum
Calla	Platycodon	Waxflower
Campanula	Poppy Pods	Willow
Centaurea	Prunus	Zinnia
Cocsmia	Queen Anne's Lace	
Coreopsis	Rudbeckia	
Cosmos	Safflower	
Dahlia	Salvia	
Delphinium	Scabiosa	
Eryngium	Sedum	
Hops	Snap Dragon	
Hydrangea	Specialty Roses	

—From the [Specialty Cut Flower Growers Association](#) list of products sold by members.

Alternate formats available upon request. 206-205-3100 (TTY 711)

No endorsement is intended of any businesses listed in this fact sheet, nor is criticism of unnamed businesses implied.

Written by [Sylvia Kantor](#), WSU Cooperative Extension King County, 1999.

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